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Review of A Different Kind of Web: New Connections Between Archives and Our Users

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Review of *A Different Kind of Web: New Connections Between Archives and Our Users*

By Kate Theimer, ed. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2011.
369 pp. Soft cover. \$69.95. ISBN 1-931666-39-3

Archivists have witnessed an extraordinary change over the last ten-plus years in the ways that we disseminate information about our collections. We've gone from simply posting our finding aids online in HTML or EAD and writing MARC catalog records to building interactive digital databases, posting film clips from our collections on YouTube, uploading historical photos to Flickr Commons, and blogging about all of these things in workplace blogs. In the process, archivists have changed too. We are (or should be) no longer passive "gatekeepers," focused on the proper use and retrieval of archival sources, but active engagers with users new and old, continually experimenting with the possibilities the Internet holds for making our collections more accessible and relevant.

Kate Theimer's *A Different Kind of Web* explores the possibilities that Web 2.0 technologies—Twitter, Flickr, YouTube, Second Life, wikis, blogs, and more—have for changing the way archivists work in our present day and age. Theimer divides the book into sections that each focus on an implied goal of using Web 2.0 technologies: increased outreach to users; increased user engagement with collections; and better and more efficient management of archival collections. Each of these sections begins with an introductory essay, followed by case studies that examine particular Web projects and the participants' goals, experiences, and lessons learned. Other critical essays by Terry D. Baxter and Randall C. Jimerson take a step back from the particulars to examine the broader ethical implications and challenges of Web 2.0 in the archives and remind us of the role of analog options in archival work.

The projects described in *A Different Kind of Web* run the gamut from simple (such as Jessica Lacher-Feldman's experiment with using Facebook as an outreach tool at the W.S. Hoole Special Collections Library at the University of Alabama) to complex (the National Archives of Australia's project to build a website documenting the records of men and women involved in World War I with an interactive map interface and user-driven scrapbook). Though Kate Theimer is clear in her introduction that the book is not meant to be a "how to" manual for Web 2.0 projects, one of the nice points of the book is how many of these projects used out-of-the-box, user-ready platforms that readers could, with little IT experience, replicate in their archives. As an archivist who already uses "easy" Web platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and blogging to engage with users, I was particularly inspired by Robert S. Cox and Danielle Kovacs' essay on using WordPress for the *UMarmot* catalog at the

Department of Special Collections and University Archives at UMass-Amherst to create a dynamic, search engine-accessible catalog based on a blog format.

One of the drawbacks, however, of *A Different Kind of Web* is that it is written almost entirely from the archivist's perspective. Theimer does try to balance this out with two essays that discuss users' experiences with doing archival research in the digital age, one from a National History Day coordinator and another written by a college history professor. These essays are notable because they express far more concern than the archivists do over the ways in which primary sources are being mediated and interpreted online. Therefore, I would have liked to read more commentary from the user perspective—especially because a common complaint in many of the case studies is that the project directors could not adequately analyze whether their projects were benefitting their users.

A Different Kind of Web also suffers from being a bit behind the times. The problem with writing about emerging Web trends is that they change quickly, and because many of the studies in this book concluded in 2009, some of the Web platforms they discuss have either become ubiquitous or obsolete in the intervening years. It feels a little dated, for instance, to read in 2012, about the particulars of the Hoole Library's Facebook "experiment" since by now, hosting a page on the social media site has become *de rigueur* for so many archives. Moreover, one Web project described in the book, the British National Archives' *Your Archives* wiki, went off-line earlier this year; the explanation given on its website is that "it doesn't fit with the seamless user experience that we want to provide"—a clearly different conclusion than the one offered by the case study in the book. Lastly, new websites—notably the "pinboard"-style photo-sharing website Pinterest, which is now being used by the Smithsonian and other institutions to highlight items from their collections—are not addressed in the book simply because they did not exist two years ago.

The underlying question, then, that readers will come away with is: if we're devoting all this time to new ways to engage our users with our collections and if these technologies are changing so quickly, is it really worth it? The authors in *A Different Kind of Web*, with few exceptions, come to the conclusion that, yes, it is—and so will you. Don't read this book without a computer nearby. You'll want to make sure to go online to see for yourself what these Web 2.0 projects look like so that you can run back to your office immediately to plot your own plans for Web-based exhibits, blogs, interactive catalogs, and more.

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